

RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN ORISSA IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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Orissa was occupied by the British during the Second Maratha War. By the treaty of Deogaon which was concluded on December 17, 1803, Raghuji Bhonsla ceded to the East India Company "in perpetual sovereignty, the province of Cuttack, including the port and District of Balasore", Raghuji also agreed to confirm certain treaties which had been concluded in the course of the war with his feudatories by the British Government. The feudatory states or 'Garjats' which came under the control of the latter soon after the occupation of Orissa were 16 in number, and they were generally known as the Tributary Mahals of Orissa. Two more 'mahals' were added to the number in 1837. Thus, the three districts of Balasore, Cuttack and Puri on the sea coast and eighteen Tributary Mahals in the hill regions to the west constituted the British Orissa in the 19th century. The British laws and regulations were not enforced in the Tributary Mahals, and therefore only the three districts in the coastal region were under the direct administration of the British Government. The total area of British Orissa in the 19th century was 23,907 sq. miles of which 16,184 sq. miles were occupied by the Tributary Mahals. The present State of Orissa is, of course,

*. Tributary Mahals - Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Nilagiri, Dhenkanal, Angul, Daspalla, Talcher, Hindole, Narsinghpur, Tigiria, Baramba, Khendpara, Nayagarh, Ranpur, Athgarh, Banki, Baud and Athmallick.

much larger than the 19th century Orissa as the latter did not include all the Oriya-speaking territories within its jurisdiction. In course of time the British conquest of Orissa brought about certain movements in the religious fields. The nerve-centre of Orissan religion and culture is Lord Jagannath or the 'Lord of the Universe'. He is one of the most famous deities of the Hindus. Pilgrims in large numbers from all parts of India visit his famous Temple at Puri in all seasons. The fame of the Lord and of his Temple were well known to the British long before their conquest of Orissa. The British Government wanted to adopt a very tolerant attitude and a specific policy towards the Temple in order to conciliate the Hindus who constituted almost the entire population of Orissa. Therefore, on August 3, 1803, the Marquis of Wellesley issued strict orders to Lt. Col. Campbell, who commanded the troops for the occupation of Orissa, regarding the Temple.

Wellesley wrote to Campbell¹: "On your arrival at Jaggernaut, you will employ every possible precaution to preserve the respect due to the Pagoda, and to the religious prejudices of the Brahmins and pilgrims. You will furnish the Brahmins with such guards as shall afford perfect security to their persons, rites and ceremonials, and to the sanctity of of the religious edifices, and you will strictly enjoin those under your command to observe your orders on this important subject, with the utmost degree of accuracy and vigilance."

He rather warned Campbell: "You will understand that no part of the property, contained in the Pagoda of Jaggernaut, or in

1. M. Martins (ed), Despatches etc! of the Marquis of Wellesley during his Administration in India, Vol. III, pp. 269-70.

any religious edifice, or possessed by any of the priests and Bramins, or persons of any description attached to the temples or religious institutions is to be considered as prize to the army. All such property must be respected as being consecrated to religious use by the customs or prejudices of the Hindoos. No account is to be taken of any such property, nor is any person to be allowed to enter the Pagodas or sacred buildings without the express desire of the Bramins."² Wellesley's policy paved the way for a smooth conquest of the Province.

Soon after the conquest, the British authorities adopted a very liberal policy towards the Temple of Jagannath. They tried their best to maintain the Temple in the same manner as it was maintained during the administration of the Maratha Government and incurred necessary expenses for that purpose.³ The Christian Government did not hesitate to become the 'Churchwarden' of a Hindu deity.

Such a policy had two immediate consequences. First, the people of Orissa in general remained very much satisfied with the British authorities for their patronage of the Temple of their Lord. Secondly, the Christian missionaries began their vehement attack on the religion and culture of the people of Orissa in general and the institution of Jagannath in particular, and they blamed the British authorities for such a liberal policy towards the Temple, which, they believed,

2. Ibid, p. 270

3. Bengal Revenue Proceedings, No.9 of March 11, 1844, Commissioner of Cuttack to the Sadar Board of Revenue, August 26, 1843.

encouraged idolatrous practices. However, the policy of the British Government remained unchanged for a long time because the people were rather satisfied by their policy. The people, especially the orthodox section, looked down upon the Christian missionaries who vehemently criticised the worship of Jagannath. But the missionaries made sustained efforts to wipe out idolatrous practices and by the end of the first half of the 19th century, their labour was fruitful in two directions namely, the dissociation of the Government from the management of the Jagannath Temple and the conversion of some people into Christianity.

In the second half of the 19th century we find the reaction of the people against the preachings of the Christian missionaries and the western culture. On the one hand, the so-called enlightened section accepted Bramho faith which had made much progress by that time in Bengal and on the other hand, an indigenous cult known as 'Mahima Dharma' brought a large number of people into its fold and checked the mass conversion to Christianity.

Now I shall discuss the impact of all these movements in some detail.

MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN ORISSA

It must be mentioned in the beginning that no systematic work has been done on the missionary activities in Orissa. Source materials on the topic are scattered throughout the State at the different centres of their activities, and the old journals, newspapers, publications of the missionary press contain enough of new materials on the subject.

The European mind was first awakened by the fearful accounts of the Jagannath Temple, its festivals and customs narrated by Claudius Buchanan, Vice-Provost of the College of Fort William, who visited Orissa in 1806. He gave a horrible picture of the pilgrim and their self immolation under the wheels of the Car of Jagannath. The teachings of Christianity to the pilgrims by distributing copies of the Bible, he believed, would remove such superstitious practices, and he wanted the Government to undertake such measures. But such views went against the adopted policy of the Company's Government. It raised a cry of indignation in England against the Government which tolerated such things.⁴ However, the missionary preachings against idolatry in general and the worship of Jagannath in particular did not begin in Orissa until 1823. The Baptist Missionary Society undertook the work at Puri in right earnest because "a blow at Idolatry here" would prove a "blow at the root".⁵ They understood that Jagannath or the "Lord of the Universe" drew "national reverence" from the people of India. "Here is the national temple whither the people flock to worship from every province of India." "Here is the Swarga-dwara, the Gate of Heaven, whither thousands of pilgrims came to die, lulled to their last sleep by the roar of the eternal ocean".⁶ Such was the estimate of the Lord and the Temple by the Europeans, and this naturally attracted the missionaries to

4. J.W. Kaye, Christianity in India, p.372.

5. Peggs, A History of the General Baptist Mission, p. 371.

6. Hunter, Orissa Vol. I, p. 84.

the place to work for their cherished desire to abolish idolatry. On February 12, 1822 two missionaries, William Bampton and James Paggs, arrived at Cuttack to begin their activities in Orissa. In July 1823, Bampton visited Puri during the Car Festival and from that time onwards, with characteristic missionary Zeal, he began his activities against idolatry. It was their belief that "Juggernaut, the great, the obscene, the bloody Juggernaut, must fall; long, perhaps, will be the struggle and fierce the conflict, but he must fall; and the place which knows him now will know him no more for ever".⁷

It was a fierce struggle indeed. The missionaries, on the one hand, fought against the Company's liberal policy and on the other hand, against the superstitious beliefs of the people. They roused public opinion in England,⁸ brought the matter before the House of Commons, forced the Court of Directors to revise their policy⁹ and ultimately compelled the Company to sever the connection with the Temple of Jagannath.¹⁰ In order to bring salvation to the idolatrous Hindus, they began to preach the Gospel, distributed the Bible and other religious pamphlets, established schools, etc. and finally all

7. Paggs, A History of the General Baptist Mission, p.146.

8. James Paggs(i) India's Cries to British Humanity, Luarcie, (ii) Orissa, the Garder of Superstition and Idolatry.

9. (i) Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, 1837, Vol.43, paper No.357, (ii) Ibid, 1850, Vol.41, Paper No.191, Ibid, 1852, Vol. 69, Paper No. 988.

10. Bengal Revenue Proceedings, No.17, November 5, 1857, Government of Bengal to Board of Revenue, October 30, 1857,

their attempts led some Hindus to embrace Christianity. Incidentally the first Oriya convert was a Brahmin named Gangadhar Sarangi (1828). Soon after the first conversion, the missionaries succeeded to convert more Oriyas, and they were engaged in preaching the Gospel in different parts of the province. The converts established several Christian settlements in Puri, Cuttack, Balasore, Ganjam and Sambalpur, etc. They certainly created a new socio-religious atmosphere and thought themselves to be superior to the Hindus. But the Hindus generally hated and ridiculed them. However, there is no doubt that some thoughtful Hindus now began self-analysis and became conscious of the superstitions in their own religious system. Such searching enquiries in the minds of the Hindus are the basis of the new movements in the Hindu society. In Orissa the new religious movements- the Brahmo Movement and the Mahima Movement - began in the sixties of the 19th century.

BRAMHO MOVEMENT IN ORISSA

No systematic account of the Brahmo Movement in Orissa is available, because no serious research work has been undertaken on the topic. From the old journals sporadic references are found, and I have given a brief sketch of the movement from those sources.¹¹

The Bramho preachers visited Orissa frequently and gave lectures to the people regarding their faith and organised 'Upasana' in some places. Many Bengalees were serving at that

11. The Journals are Utkal Dipika, Sambad Bahika, Sebaka and Naba Sambad. They are available in the office of 'Utkal Sahitya Samaj', Cuttack.

time in different offices and schools in Orissa. They readily came under the influence of the Brahmo preachers and they formed the nucleus of the Brahmo movement in Orissa. Professor Haranath Bhattacharya, who was working in the Cuttack College, took the initiative in the formation of a Brahmo Samaj in Orissa. On July 1, 1869, the Utkala Brahmo Samaj was established at Cuttack. Many high officials serving in Cuttack and other district headquarters became members of the Samaj. Bhusan Chandra Bhattacharya, Ramnarayan Dutta, Girish Chandra Mitra, Biswanath Banerjee, Ram Kumar Bhattacharya etc. took enough pains to propagate the Brahmo ideas. Several schools were established, books and journals (Utkal Subakari, 1869, Dharmabodhini, 1874) were published and 'Brahmo Mandir' were raised for the purpose. Brahmo preachers visited the Garjat States like Dhenkanal, Talcher, Pallahara, Badamba etc., and they tried their best to bring common people in to their folds. Some prominent Oriyas like Pyari Mohan Acharya, Madhusudan Rao, Biswanath Kar gave their heart and soul for the propagation of the Brahmo cult. There is no doubt that the educated people of Orissa in the second half of the 19th century were much inclined to adopt the Brahmo faith. Unlike the Brahmos of Bengal they were not divided into different groups because their number was rather small. Though small in number, yet their movement stirred the minds of the people in Orissa who became conscious of the limitations of their socio-religious system.

THE 'MAHIMA' MOVEMENT

As response to the challenge of the Christian missionaries bitter criticism of the Hindu socio-religious system, enlightened Indians took shelter under the anglicised Bramho Movement. The movement was popular among the educated people in general. But the orthodox section and the common people had nothing to do with it. The ordinary Hindu longed to see the appearance of a saint whose utterances would be based on the bedrock of 'realisation' and whose movement would reitalise the traditional Hindu society with a new religious fervour. The appearance of Ramakrishna Paramhansa in Bengal and Jogeswara Mahima Prabhu in Orissa fulfilled such a need.

The 'Mahima' movement is essentially indigenous in character. A large number of people in Orissa became devotees of the cult. It also spread to the neighbouring states like Bengal, Assam and Andhra in course of time. The exponents of this cult never liked the lime light of publicity, and naturally their activities were shrouded in obscurity for a long time. In recent years, several publications¹² have come out on the history, philosophy and teachings of the 'Mahima Dharma'. However, a number of works on 'Mahima Dharma' are still unpublished. They are generally available on palmleaf manuscript forms. The history of this religious movement in all its detail is yet to be compiled on a scientific basis.

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12. Viswa Bharati & the University of Utkal have published works on 'Mahima Dharma' (1) Chittaranjan Das, Mahima Dharma of Orissa Viswa Bharati, 1952. (2) Satya Mahima Dharma Pratipadhak, 2 Vols. (3) The Philosophy of Alekh Param Brahma, Utkal University.

The pioneering work on this field is 'Mahima Dharma of Orissa' by Sri Chitta Ranajin Das. He has removed certain grave errors regarding the origin and meaning of this movement, especially the error of N.N.Vasu.¹³ I shall briefly discuss the history of the movement in Orissa in the 19th century.

The early history of Mahima Goswami, like many saints, is shrouded in obscurity. He appears for the first time in 1826 at Puri, and gave up his worldly life in 1876 at Joranda (in the Dhenkanal District) which is now regarded as the headquarters of the 'Mahima Movement'. For fifty years, Mahima Goswami lived as a true saint practising Yoga, other forms of austerities and Penances. Slowly a band of devoted followers gathered round him. The principal site of his austerities was Mount Kapilas in the District of Dhenkanal. The first convert to the 'Mahima' cult was Siddha Govinda Babu, and Bhima Bhoi was the first philosopher-poet of the cult, who got the blessings of the Master and composed a large number of philosophical treatises.

Mahima Goswami travelled throughout Orissa and instructed his followers in the worship of 'Alekha Param Brahma'. There were a number of 'Siddhas' of the cult (traditionally there number is 92), who preached its tenets in Orissa and in some neighbouring states. The hallmark of this religious movement was total renunciation on the part of the followers who adopted 'sanyasa'. They were required to travel constantly, to beg not more than one meal from any householder, and not to stay more than one night in any village. They took only one principal meal in the daytime and took nothing in the night.

13. N.N. Vasu, The Modern Buddhism and its followers in Orissa, published by the Author, 1911.

Even the principal centre of the 'Mahima' cult, Joranda, had no permanent provision for its maintenance. In course of time, the number of followers of the 'Mahima' cult increased considerably and they are now to be found not only in Orissa but also in Andhra, Bengal, Assam, etc. Besides the 'Sanyasis', there are lay devotees and the latter constitutes the bulk of 'Mahima' followers.

Like Brahmos, the followers of the Mahima Dharma believed in the worship and adoration of "the Eternal, Unsearchable and Immutable being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe". He is 'Alekhya' (without description), 'Anakar' (without shape), Anadi (without end). Self-surrender to the 'Param Brahma' or 'Sunya Purusha' is the highest goal of the followers of the 'Mahima' cult. It does not prescribe rigid asceticism but lays stress on disciplined habits to control body and mind. It does not recognise any distinction between caste, creed, colour or any such narrow social division of human beings. Its aim is to unite all on the common platform of 'Sunya Sadhana' or the worship of the 'Void'.

In the 19th century, the Mahima cult spread throughout Orissa and the common people were very much attracted towards it. There is no doubt that it was a powerful force to counteract, on the one hand, the movements of the Christian missionaries, and on the other hand, the appeals of the anglicised Bramho movement. Like the Ramkrishna Mission movement it kindled new hopes in the minds of millions of Hindus who could aspire to find salvation in their own traditional system.